

# THE BACK-DOOR EXPERIENCES OF A WASHINGTON WOMAN



The Grocery Boy Gives His List of Casualties—"A Man Fell Off His Wheel and Broke His Leg on Thirty-second Street."



The Garbage Knight at Bay—"Do You Remove Garbage From 'You' Street?"



"In the Afternoon When You Get Your Beads On."

## Temporary Autocrat of the Gas Range Confesses That Rear Entrance Visiting List Is of Great Interest to Her.

## Smashing and Dashing Grocery Boy Is a More Self-Important Individual Than World-Bearing Atlas.

By A. M. M.

WITH the summer exodus, even we of the suburban heights notice a perceptible falling off in the number of our neighbors, and an added stillness to our already quiet neighborhood.

The flaxen-haired tots next door, whose shouting voices and pattering footsteps were heard in the spring, all day long, have departed, with their parents and nurses, and there is little to break the quietude except the passing of an occasional vehicle, the grating hum of the gardener's lawnmower, or the creak of a rain cloud.

### A Quiet Household.

Ours is always a quiet household, but it is now more quiet than usual, since I am left in sole charge of the big house, which is now what Mrs. Ward calls "a manless, childless, catless, dogless household." Even the cookless one, for the queen of the kitchen, too, has departed, and I am enthroned in that part of the household where she once reigned supreme. While one has many duties to perform in the absence of that domestic tyrant, there is a certain sense of exhilaration in being the autocrat of the gas range, and independent wielder of the broiler, and in doing whatever one pleases in one's own kitchen without interference or criticism. If the hours are too fully occupied with the trivial duties of housekeeping, there is some compensation in the feeling of independence, born of emancipation from the supervision of servants.

We do not always stand in positive awe of the cook, as poor Mr. Merdle did of his superior butler, but who among us has not at times quailed before a domestic? Perhaps, too, the very fact of its being ordinarily forbidden ground makes my kitchen more attractive now, and the art of cookery more alluring. Nor need one scorn to acquire the rudiments of "pot lore," since there is no disputing the truth that:

"We may live without poetry, music, or books, but civilized man cannot live without cooks."

### Few Hot Day Visitors.

During the long, sultry summer days few visitors cross the threshold of my front door, which is more often than not hospitably closed, while I dwell in the back premises. To be sure, when the twilight deepens an occasional caller drops in to share with me the enjoyable contents of the big, vine-encrusted sofa, where I sit nightly, even if human companionship fails me; for there is no better companion than Mother Nature when one has come to know her well and think, too, what a retinue she brings to keep me company. When the midsummer voices begin—the song of the apple-green katydid, the insistent chirp of the little crickets, and the droning of tree toads—I revel in the restful sounds that only serve to emphasize the evening stillness. In the highest branches of a monster oak roosts an owl whose melancholy hoot or dismal laugh sounds ominous to the ear of the superstitious, yet I should feel sorry to part with him, since he is one of the fixtures of our neighborhood.

Then, too, in the bright summer days there are the birds, whose songs of many kinds ring out from surrounding trees, making loneliness impossible. Who is the pessimist who said that the homely little English sparrow had driven all songbirds away, when the robins, sparrows, thrushes, cardinal birds, flickers, and many other kinds—in all company about thirty varieties—come fearlessly around the lawn at my back door?

### Backdoor Callers.

Back door visiting list is the one, these days, which interests me most, and occupies the greater portion of my time. My first visitor is the mysterious milkman, whom I seldom see except when he comes at the end of the month for the reward which I give him for his faithful services. I cherish a feeling of gratitude toward this unseen deliverer, which I give him as freely as I do his monthly dollars. Dear, humorous old Holmes expressed something of what I feel when he said:

"I called my servant and he came, and how kind it was of him, to mind a slender man like me, the mighty limb!"

The milkman comes at the early hour of five o'clock in the morning, and while his rowdy head is still clinging to the door he is loath to leave, hence he is unseen, but none the less, faithful deliverer. But there are times when he is loving herd stray too far from

their proper pasturage, and then comes a taste of garlic, or a weedy taint to the rich milk, which I no longer relish with my morning cereal. But even a personal audience with the man of bottles is not necessary. I merely write a note, gently suggesting a change of diet for the Jerseys, and put it in the mouth of the milk bottle, and lo! upon the second day thereafter the milk has resumed its pristine purity and I know that the cows are again amid the clover.

### The Ice Man.

The next caller who comes to minister to my comfort is also an unseen attendant, and one who lends his daily contribution to the man of bottles. He is not a bad fellow, this burly leeman, but, as the days grow longer, I cannot help noticing that my lump of ice grows smaller, and the sense of proper proportion is therefore disturbed. I am compelled to remonstrate with a note, which I pin to the ice chest in the open storeroom. But the man of tongs is adroit and clever. He argues, in his response, that he furnishes so many pounds of ice per week, and as he breaks it into daily lumps, he cannot always cut them precisely the same size, but he endeavors to maintain "a general average." But the hint is taken and next day the "general average" is larger.

The first visitor whom I meet in person is the rushing, smashing, dashing, hurrying, grocery boy, who feels the importance of his daily load more acutely than Atlas ever felt the burden of the earth. I am satisfied that "Teddy" Roosevelt never felt so self-important as this green-grocer boy feels. Nevertheless, with all the orders he has on hand, he manages, in a few minutes, to pour forth more neighborhood gossip than I hear in a fortnight from anyone else. He must be something of a fatalist; at least his news is generally of a calamitous nature, and he evinces an almost ghoulish delight in relating the harrowing tales.

Do I know that a man was burned to death by the explosion of a kerosene lamp last night? Yes, and his house burned, too? Have I heard that a man was knocked off his wheel and had his leg broken yesterday on Thirty-second Street? Am I aware that diphtheria is in the neighborhood, and that a typhoid epidemic is threatened? Not a cheerful budget of news, certainly, but the grocery boy dashes off, whistling through his teeth, as though he thrives on the misery of his fellows.

### Occasional Mishaps.

Perhaps it is merely due to check his own exuberant spirits, and tone them down to the level of more sedate folks; even as he gives vent to his overweening glee sometimes, by dumping the bag of eggs down so heavily that he breaks from two to six out of the dozen—a sort of letting off steam, as it were. At least I charitably set it down to that cause; until, one day, I inadvertently picked up a bag that had been dampened by a broken egg, so that the whole contents—two dozen in number—came crashing down on my tidy kitchen floor, creating a mess of scrambled eggs not to be found on any breakfast menu. I'm afraid I've never quite approved of the grocery boy's methods since. The ash can, too, is a source of trouble, but little interest. The dust from his cans seems to have clouded over any personality he may have possessed, and I think of him as something negative and almost impalpable, like the clouds of his own raising. So I dismiss him lightly, as one would blow away a speck of unwelcome soot.

The back-door guest most eagerly watched for, and the absence of whom creates genuine distress, is the garbage gentleman. Not that he is fair to look upon, or clad in "sweet-smelling garments," quite the contrary. But since he is a necessary adjunct to good housekeeping and stands for all that is sanitary and wholesome, I cannot do without him. Indeed, I have dubbed him my "Knight of the Garbage Pail," ever ready for the reward which I give him for his faithful services. I cherish a feeling of gratitude toward this unseen deliverer, which I give him as freely as I do his monthly dollars. Dear, humorous old Holmes expressed something of what I feel when he said:

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Uncle George: "I Just Love Coffee to Death."

will; but he cheerfully ignored the sarcasm, and answered that he would give them to his brother, who I thought very unselfish and considerate of him. Now, whether this act of sacrifice on his part soured his disposition and he became a recluse, or whether I brought upon myself the usual fate which some cynic has said we bring upon ourselves by misplaced generosity, I know not. But my knight mysteriously disappeared. That night a number of unbidden guests—dogs and cats in the neighborhood—overturned my garbage cans and scattered the contents broadcast over the lawn. In a day or two an odor that "stinketh up to heaven" arises from the overfull pails, and I make an unsuccessful attempt to cremate the offensive matter. Failing in this, a great yearning for my absent knight comes over me. I cannot sit patiently, like "Mariana in the moated grange," moaning: "He cometh not; I am weary, weary; I would that I were dead!" So I start out to seek my errant knight, feeling a vague hope that I might meet him or his "brother" down in the business streets of town. Along the softening concrete, in the blazing summer sun, comes the unmistakable rumbling of the iron wagon. Knowing that my knight has substitutes or understudies, I think I will try a little diplomacy with this black representative, who is not the one to whom I gave the hat.

### Removal of Garbage.

"Do you remove the garbage from 'You' Street?" I inquire. But the garbage gentleman foresees some possible trap and cunningly answers my question by asking another: "Between what streets on 'You' Street?"

I see my danger, but there is no alternative but to locate the precise square. The garbage man heaves a sigh of apparent relief.

"Oh, no; I take it from the square above you."

Then, fearing further questioning, he points behind him and says: "There's your man, I think," whips up his horses, and is gone. The second man whom I accost looks strangely familiar, and I could almost take him for "Humphry Davy" that it is he—the long lost—whom I seek. But he looks at me with a blank countenance of unrecognition and vows that he never sees him. His duty being confined to the square below and the other side of the street. So, in despair, I return home, and the iron entering my soul at this point, I sit down and write a note to the Health Officer. A prompt and dignified response comes from this functionary regarding all blame for the state of affairs and shifting the responsibility upon the Street Cleaning Department. It savors a little of Dickens' "Circumlocution Office," and their way of "How not to do it," but I attack the second official's office with better results.

### Complaint Clerk.

A little later I am receiving, at my front door, a very civil gentleman, who registers my name and complaint, offering promise of prompt relief. I have scarcely dismissed him as another representative of the Street Cleaning Department is forthcoming, at the back door, where he marshals two knights of the garbage, who come sheepishly down the walk, single file, like convicts led to execution. And lo! one is he who had said he "only tended to the square above" and the other is he who "only goes below and across the street!"

With guilt written all over their black faces, they shuffle to the unsavory pails, and, seeing me point an accusing finger at each, they mutter something about supposing that everybody had gone. "The front shutters being always closed."

My only revenge will be to refrain from future tips or gifts, and to strip them of their titles. They shall be hereafter only plain slopemen, to whom I shall give nothing—not even gratitude.

My pet visitor, among all the back door callers, is a black "gentleman of the old school," who calls himself "Uncle George." He is a relic of ante-bellum days, and of a class now rapidly disappearing, and his joyous chuckle and quaint sayings are a constant source of entertainment. Uncle George is my general factotum, and jack-of-all-trades, and will do conscientiously whatever is required of him. Observing the zeal and interest with which he works, I say to him:

"I think, Uncle George, if these were slave times and you were for sale, that I should buy you."

"Would you, miss?" he responds with a delighted chuckle.

### For Sale Cheap.

"I spec' my ole 'oman 'd sell me mighty cheap, as I see a heap older 'n she is."

This same "ole 'oman" gives Uncle untold anxiety through her lack of thrift and general "no account ways."

"Look lak my ole 'oman is jes lak one o' dem fool gossins," he grumbled one day.

"One o' dem fool little gossins what stands out in de rain and lets de water pour down on 'em twel dey drim. Las' winter Uncle Gawge fotch in a pile o' wood, 'n coal, 'n vittles enough to kerry us troo de winter; but dat fool 'oman jes set down and pile in de coal and lay de wood on de fiah, and et, and et, and talk, and talk, twel de wasn't no wood, nor coal, nor vittles, and then Uncle Gawge has to go and git moah."

He moralizes on the senseless pride of his race in this wise:

"Niggaahs don't generally have much sense. Now when you says to me 'Uncle Gawge, you can have what cake is left,' I see allers been used to white folks ways, so I puts it in ma pocket and jes naturally says: 'tankee, miss.' I don't pretend, lak some black folks, dat I see had a plenty. Dey says, 'No tankee, no moah!' 'n lak as not dem niggaahs as poah as de wust trash in de worl'. Mebbe deyse hungry at dat berry minute. Tankee, miss, no, I don't keef fer; but, yes I'll take a cup o' coffee; I jes love coffee to death!"

He is solicitous about the health of his employers, and his greeting in the morning is full of polite concern.

### A Solicitous Employee.

"Good mawnin', miss. How you feel dis mawnin'? Not berry well? I mighty sorry. I see you're mighty little and delicate lookin', but agin you're berry spry and spunky an' can do a heap o' work."

Uncle George has an easy familiarity of speech, which is the tone of an ingrained old family servant and far removed from impertinence. I have always had a squaw-like fondness for heads, a fancy which the present fashion gives me an opportunity to indulge in, and my head box contains some pretty specimens of these baubles—richly carved wooden "rosary" beads, and

riously painted Chinese beads, with splashes of Oriental color, rich black Whittby jets, beads of white wax, and coral beads, and various other kinds. At times I like to fancy that one of my faraway ancestresses may have had a dash of Indian blood in her veins, which would account for my secret love for red gowns and beads. Uncle George admires the beads tremendously and regards them with almost superstitious admiration.

"You don't feel berry well dis mawnin', miss," he will say, commiseratingly, "but jes' wait twel dis afternoon when you git your beads on, an' den you'll feel first rate."

One Sunday afternoon when I meet him far down the street and have to take a second look at the old fellow, in his spruce, gala attire, to see if it really is Uncle George, he calls out, in joyous recognition:

"I see mighty glad to see you, miss! You cert'ly is lookin' mighty well, an' I see you've got yer beads on."

I think he really imagines they possess some occult power to transmit health and beauty to their wearer.

Uncle George's bet-noir is gasoline, of which he knows little, but fears much. Its explosive properties are vaguely known to him through report, and an occasional fatality through a gasoline stove or an automobile. Recently when I have him cleaning rugs for me out under the big oak trees, he views the gasoline can with much distrust, and is loath to touch it. Seeing his evident reluctance to meddle with this excellent cleanser, I dip a lace shawl fearlessly into the fluid and shake it out before his disapproving gaze. Thereupon he protests at my reckless disregard of explosives.

"Ef you keep on dat way, miss, you'll bust youself up in pieces, you sholy will!"

Later on, when I have partially calmed his fears, and instructed him how to use the stuff, he goes about cleaning the Smyrna rug in evident trepidation, holding the wet cloth at arm's length, saying:

"Well, miss, ef it should 'splode I'd be blowed up, an' I reckon I'll not see you alive no moah; so good-by, ef I should bust!"

Allaying His Fears.

"But, uncle," I try to reassure him, "you will not be blown up; it can't explode if there is no light near it. There is no danger whatever."

"Oh! yes, miss, I knows dat; folks meddle wid dese dynamo tingas, an' cleans with 'em, twel dey does it once too often, an' den, bang! dey goes, an' dat is de las' of 'em. What is dey? Jes' now! You jes' look at dat man! What blowed up his house right over his head, week befo' las'?"

"But, uncle," I protest, "that was a lighted kerosene lamp which the man knocked over, and, of course, it exploded."

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## Most Eagerly Awaited Guest Is the Garbage Gentleman, Who is Dubbed a Gallant Knight and True.

## "Uncle Gawge," General Factotum and Relic of Ante-Bellum Days, Constant Source of Entertainment.

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